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ABSTRACT

Research would seem tc indicate that black and other non-white students in private schools are at or near the national norm in every area, and far ahead of their peers in public school. There have been notable achievements in the education of black children by Catholic and other inner-city private schools. But since these schools exist in very limited numbers and are largely tuition-supported, most black parents do not have the opportunity to choose a high-quality private school for the education of their children. Our system of funding education makes inevitable the cycle of poverty for most poor black children. A remedy for the gross inequities in educational opportunities would be the adoption of education voucher programs. Vouchers of monetary value issued by the government to all parents with school-age children would provide black parents, and others, a real choice in the education of their children, a choice that would enable them to send their children to high quality public and private schools. (Author/EB)

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Quality Education for Inner-City Minorities Through Education Vouchers

by Virgil C. Blum, S.J.

from an address delivered to the School of Education, University of San Francisco, February 9, 1978

I would like to talk to you this evening about quality education for blacks and Hispanics, and about education vouchers as a means of giving all poor families a choice of quality education.

About six months ago the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights initiated a modest research project in black and Hispanic schools which will, when completed, entail selected Catholic, Protestant and non-denominational schools in Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Newark, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Our purpose is to study how private schools are serving minority students in the inner cities, and how educational opportunities for these groups might be improved through access to alternative educational structures.

But before discussing our initial findings in these studies, I wish to correct two very misleading myths that have become current about private education.

The first myth to be corrected is that Catholic schools constitute an overwhelming proportion of private schools in America. While once true, this is no longer the case. During the past ten years we have witnessed a rapid growth in the number of schools operating under the auspices of Protestant churches. By the school year 1976-77, only 57 percent of the students in church-related schools were in Catholic schools. This is a far cry from the 80 to 90 percent figures that were cited by the Supreme Court in several opinions in the early 1970's, and are still cited today by the opponents of freedom of choice in education.

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The second myth is that private schools, particularly Catholic schools, are havens for white students fleeing from desegrated public schools in the cities, and that their continued existence results in a dual school system, one white and the other predominantly black. This is absolutely false. Catholic schools in our major cities have made a very strong commitment to educating low-income children, regardless of race or even of religious affiliation.

The parents who are sending their children to the schools visited by our researchers are trying to break out of the cycle of poverty.

A survey of Catholic schools in ten metro areas in the 1975-76 school year showed that out of nearly a quarter-million students, 26 percent were black, 17½ percent were Spanish-surnamed, and 2½ percent were other minorities. One in eight of the students was non-Catholic. Let's look at a few major cities. In Chicago's metro-area Catholic schools, 55 percent were black, 23 percent Spanish-surnamed, and 39 percent were non-Catholic. In

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Washington, 65 percent were black, 5 percent Spanish-surnamed, and 26 percent were non-Catholic, and in Philadelphia, 42 percent were black, 3 percent Spanish-surnamed, and 10 percent were non-Catholic.

This evening however, I am not so much concerned about integrated education as I am about quality education, with particular reference to black children.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress has revealed that black students score consistently below the median in every subject-area tested, in many cases by as much as 15 to 20 points. The causes of this are complex, but the results are obvious: Blacks have a higher rate of school dropouts; they are less likely to attend college; they are more likely to be unemployed; and they will have a lower income level than the national median. Since their children too will have a relatively disadvantaged background, they are likely to repeat the same pattern.

It is a regrettable fact that the quality of public school education is generally declining. One indication is that the average SAT scores have dropped over 60 points in a twelve-year period. But the per pupil cost of public school education has doubled in the past ten years, to an average of $1,388 for the 1975-76 school year. By contrast, a survey of Catholic school costs in 10 large archdioceses yielded an average per pupil expenditure of just $397. In Chicago's public schools, the average administrative cost per pupil was $42.73; in Chicago's Catholic schools, the average administrative cost per pupil was just $4.10.

Public school education, moreover, has been particularly ineffective for low-income black children in our major cities. These children generally average two to three years behind their grade level in such basic skills as reading, writing and mathematics. But our researchers have found that black and other non-white students in private schools are at or near the national norm in every area, and far ahead of their peers in public schools.

Students in Washington, D.C. Catholic elementary and secondary schools scored *above* the national average on standardized achievement tests in reading, math, and language arts in 1976. Sixty-five percent of the students in the archdiocese's 84 elementary schools are black; 26 percent are non-Catholic.

Our researchers visited East Catholic High in Detroit, where 93 percent of the students are black. They found that the close relationship between the administration and the students had resulted in improved achievement, a higher average daily attendance, and a reduction in the rate of dropouts. Sixty to 70 percent of East Catholic's graduates go on to some postsecondary education, and last year East Catholic's graduating class was awarded a total of $75,000 in grants for higher education. These figures, let me emphasize, compare quite favorably with national averages, and, moreover, they are far above the expectations for most low-income black students, notwithstanding the fact that 70 percent of East Catholic's students come from families below the official poverty level, qualifying them for free lunches and free bus passes.

More than half of all the eighth graders in the New York City Public Schools...were functionally illiterate in 1973.

Tuition at East Catholic is $600 per year. The principal of the school reported that this is a serious problem for the parents, saying: "I think our people have their gas cut off, their lights turned out, put less food on the table, they'd do anything for tuition, but that bothers me." Fifty-five percent of the students at East Catholic are non-Catholic.

Our Catholic League researchers investigated seven elementary schools in Milwaukee, five of them Catholic and two non-denominational community schools. The schools represented a wide range of educational alternatives, from a bilingual school with a predominantly Spanish-speaking enrollment, stressing individualized instruction and a progressive educational philosophy, to a highly structured program emphasizing such fundamental skills as reading and mathematics, and including a strict dress code and disciplinary regulations. But one thing all of the schools had in common was the demand for close involvement of the parents in the education process. One of these schools, St. Leo's, which just opened last September, had set an initial enrollment goal of 100 children. By the time school opened, it had 280 children enrolled, and had to turn away well over 100 more applicants.

The fact that these schools are flourishing in a city such as Milwaukee, whose public school system is superior to that of most other cities, is an impressive testimony to the desire of low-income parents to give their children the best possible education, and their willingness to make great sacrifices to this end, for the tuition in these schools ranges up to $700 per year.

We did a somewhat detailed attitudinal study of the parents of black seventh and eighth grade students at Chicago's Holy Angels school. More than half of these families have an annual income under $10,000, and 46 percent of them acknowledged that tuition payments imposed a financial hardship on them. Over 40 percent of the families at Holy Angels are non-Catholic, but 95 percent of the non-Catholic families said that they considered the inclusion of religious instruction in the curriculum to be an advantage of the school.

Revealing a deep satisfaction with Catholic and quality education, 85 percent of the parents said that they expect their children to attend Catholic high schools, and 100 percent of the parents expressed the hope that their children would attend college.

When questioned about why they chose Holy Angels for their children, 80 percent of the parents cited the high quality of the education, and 40 percent said the lack of discipline in the local public schools was an important factor in their decision.

The parents who are sending their children to the schools visited by our researchers are trying to break out of the cycle of poverty. Many of them are quite poor — at one of the schools we surveyed in Milwaukee, 90 percent of the students come from families below the official poverty level — yet they are making great personal sacrifices to see to it that their children will not

be crippled for life by an inferior education.

Other surveys, too, have revealed that black students who attend private schools receive a quality or superior education. The *Washington Post* reported in 1976 that the private schools of the District of Columbia which educate only 10 percent of the black students of the District nevertheless had 70 percent of the students who qualified as National Achievement Scholarship semifinalists. In other cities, too, a disproportionate number of black students in private schools were semifinalists. In Massachusetts it was 59 percent; in Louisiana, 57 percent; Michigan 21 percent; Illinois 47 percent; Georgia 19 percent; California 34 percent; and Missouri 40 percent.

Professor Thomas Sowell of the University of California—Los Angeles published an article in *The Public Interest* (Spring, 1976), in which he reports on a survey of several black Catholic schools. Of particular interest was his observation that St. Augustine High School in New Orleans had produced 20 percent of *all* the Presidential Scholars in the history of the State of Louisiana, and, in the National Achievement Scholarship program for black students, had produced more finalists and semi-finalists than any other school in the nation. Is the student body of St. Augustine highly selective? Definitely not. In the last decade, the mean I.Q.'s were just over 100 for every year except one.

Sowell also surveyed Xavier Prep in New Orleans. He found that over 90 percent of the graduates of this Catholic high school go on to college. Again, it is relevant to ask whether Xavier students come from high-income black families. The answer is emphatically, no. Approximately 40 to 50 percent of the students come from low-income families, and many enter with serious educational deficiencies, requiring remedial work. More than 60 percent of Xavier students are eligible for the free lunch program. Although tuition is only $35 a month, tuition is a hardship on many low-income families.

The consequences of poor quality education for blacks are many and severe for both individual blacks and for American society. One of the most detrimental of these consequences, it seems to me, is functional illiteracy. Mrs. E. Babbette Edwards, president of the Harlem Parents Union, wrote that more than half of all the eighth graders in the New York City Public Schools — thirty-eight thousand — were functionally illiterate in 1973.

Last October when juniors in Florida's high schools took a three hour very basic literacy test, focused on students' ability to cope with such simple tasks as filling out job applications and reading labels on canned goods, only 6 percent of the juniors at Jacksonville's overwhelmingly black Stanton High School passed the math section.

There is no such thing as religious neutrality in the classroom. Teachers cannot be neutral about... moral issues deeply rooted in religious beliefs.

Addressing the Democratic and Republican platform committees in 1976 on these socioeconomic consequences of the low quality of public school education in New York City, and speaking in support of education vouchers, Mrs. Edwards said: "When you are the victim, when it is your children who are unenlightened, unemployed or unemployable, the criminal the junkie, disillusioned, defeated before they even begin to live, then you see the problem in a different light."

At the outset of my remarks I spoke of the notably achievements of Catholic and other inner-city private schools in the education of black children. But since these schools exist in very limited numbers and are largely tuition-supported, most black parents do not have the opportunity to choose a high-quality private school for the education of their children. Thus, our system of funding education makes inevitable the cycle of poverty for most poor black children.

A remedy for these gross inequities in educational opportunities must be found. We must find ways and means of providing black parents, and others, a real choice in the education of their children— a choice that will enable them to send their children to high quality public and private schools.

I would like to propose, as others have, that the best remedy for our gross inequities in educational opportunites is the adoption of education voucher programs. Since I do not have the time to develop in detail arguments in support of the adoption of education voucher programs, I shall in summary fashion give reasons why I think the education voucher system can best meet the educational needs of society and of all parents regardless of race, religious beliefs, or economic status.

An education voucher program can be defined as one in which the government issues vouchers of monetary value to all parents with school-age children for the payment of tuition in the public and private schools of their choice.

It need hardly be pointed out that education vouchers are, as Mrs. Edwards noted, as American as apple pie. We have many state and federal education programs that are in fact if not in name education voucher programs. For example, the GI Bill of Rights, the twenty-six state tuition-grant programs, the Federal Equal Opportunity Program, the Army, Navy and Air Force ROTC student-grant programs, the National Defense Education Act fellowship programs, the War Orphans' Educational Assistance program, and dozens of state scholarship programs.

In summary fashion, now, let me give you some reasons in support of the adoption of the education voucher system for the education of our American children.

1. Education vouchers give low-income parents equal status in the education of their children— the poor like the rich can send their children to quality public or private schools.

2. Education vouchers enable parents to reject schools in which violence, lack of discipline, inferior teaching, lack of teacher interest in students, and lack of parent involvement in the school establish the conditions of low-quality education and the consequent graduation of students who are functionally illiterate and unemployable.

3. Education vouchers enable poor parents and their children to

escape the vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment and degradation now imposed upon them through the compulsory deprivation of an equal opportunity to advance in society through quality education.

4. Education voucher programs fulfill America's obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, signed by President Carter, which guarantees the human rights of parents in education, in Part III, Article 13: "Primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all; Secondary education . . . shall be progressive[ly] . . . free education. . . . The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents . . . to choose for their children schools, other than those established by the public authorities . . . and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions."

5. Education voucher programs guarantee religious freedom rights in education. In a pluralistic society — a society made up of people of different religious beliefs — parents must have the right to choose among different religious and moral values in the education of their children. Putting it negatively, parents have a right not to have their children indoctrinated in religious and moral values that conflict with their profound beliefs and commitments.

The matter of religious freedom rights in education is critical because there is no such thing as religious neutrality in the classroom. Teachers cannot be neutral about religious issues or about moral issues deeply rooted in religious beliefs, for example, about the nature of man; about the nature and purpose of civil society; about the meaning of social justice; about the role of religion in society; about the norms of moral behavior; about the rights of disadvantaged minorities; about the rights of the unborn and the aged; about war and peace; about God and how He relates to man and his purpose in life.

6. Education voucher programs assure a better balance of racial minorities in public and private schools. This is evidenced by the fact that among the best integrated schools in America are Catholic schools serving large metropolitan areas. In ten large metro areas from New York City to San Francisco, with 666 Catholic schools and 248,057 students (1975-76), 64,555, or 25.7 percent, are black. It should be noted, moreover, that this racial balance has been achieved notwithstanding the fact that from 40 to 50 percent of the black children in inner-city Catholic schools come from low-income families.

7. The education voucher system, because it is based on principles of freedom and equality for all parents, promotes the development of an enlightened, liberal, creative and pluralistic democratic society.

Education vouchers give low-income parents equal status in the education of their children — the poor like the rich can send their children to quality schools.

8. The education voucher system underscores society's confidence in parental love and responsibility to choose the education best suited for their children's development, and it endows poor parents with the same dignity and pride of choice, responsibility, and real influence in the education of their children now enjoyed by the rich.

9. The education voucher system liberates the teacher, giving him or her a choice of educational philosophies, a greater sense of community and freedom from impersonal bureaucracy, the freedom to design and teach courses, and to choose to associate with teachers and principals of high quality and academic competence.

10. The education voucher system enables black parents and children to choose quality schools, and thus to equalize opportunities to attain better job-positions and socioeconomic status. In the phrases of Professor Thomas Sowell, it enables black parents to choose schools in which there is "widespread involvement of individual parents as such, "*. . . a sense of purpose*, a faith in what can be achieved, and an appreciation of the hard work required to achieve it," as well as a "dedicated nucleus of people in a setting where their dedication can be effectual."

11. The education voucher system can, by limiting parental choice to schools whose tuition does not exceed the face-value of the voucher by more than, let us say, twenty-five percent, excepting schools engaged in compensatory education, guarantee to every American child an equal educational opportunity regardless of race, religious beliefs or economic status. This is a level of freedom and democratic equality in education never heretofore achieved in America.

Before ending my remarks, I think it is important to note that, from a constitutional standpoint, education voucher programs can be distinguished from all the state-aid programs struck down by the Supreme Court. In the *Lemon*, *Nyquist*, *Sloan* and *Meek* cases, the Court struck down *special* legislation designed to give educational assistance to special groups of children who were, the Court noted, "predominantly" Catholic. On the other hand, in *Cochran*, *Everson* and *Allen*, the Court upheld *general* legislation designed to provide secular textbooks or bus transportation to all children in all schools.

A state law providing education vouchers for all children in all schools would be *general* legislation designed, not for a particular group of children but for all the school-aged children of the state. If such legislation were enacted, the Court could not rule that all children, except those attending Christian and Jewish schools, could share equally in the voucher program, for such a ruling would be a gross violation of religious freedom rights, guaranteed by the First Amendment.

President Carter's budget proposes the expenditure of scores of millions of dollars to study how the public schools can get back to teaching the basics. Getting back to basics can best be done, it seems to me, by the enactment of education voucher programs. That is, the best way to induce a return to teaching the basics in the public schools is through market inducements, the giving of market-place choices to parents in the education of their children.